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ABSTRACT

For use by those preparing statewide competency testing programs and those developing basic skills examinations at the postsecondary level, this paper provides guidelines for writing items for tests of basic reading skills. Following a discussion of how to choose appropriate items, how to word items, and how to select appropriate reading passages, the paper then describes each section of the basic skills reading examination and provides item specifications for each. (FL)

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Item Specifications for a College Level Basic Skills Reading Test

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GUIDELINES FOR WRITING READING ITEMS

I. The total item (the item stem and the four options) determines which category/subcategory is being assessed. Do not rely solely on the stem to identify the category/subcategory. Check your options. The examples below illustrate how the options can affect the category classification of items.

Examples (inappropriate)

The following item is inappropriate for testing the given classification of organizational patterns because options "B" and "C" test fact-opinion.

The author seems to make his point through

A. critical evaluation.
B. contrasting facts.
C. personal opinion.
D. historical examples.

The following item is inappropriate for testing the given classification of main idea because the options are measuring organizational patterns.

The author develops his main idea through the use of

A. anecdote.
B. example.
C. detail.
D. close reasoning.

II. Whenever possible, the item stem should clearly and completely convey the question. The student should not have to read the four response options to determine what is being asked. Try to write item stems that enable the student to predict the answer from the stem. It is often easier to write a complete stem as a direct question than as a statement. The stem should contain enough information to be usable as a completion or short answer item. The following are examples of poor item stems and their better versions.

Poor Wording	Better Wording
1. Plant hormones	1. In what part of the plant do hormones originate?
2. The writer	2. According to Emerson, who should pay the cost of public education?

Poor Wording	Better Wording
3. The reader could infer	3. What is the main idea of the selection?
4. The author seems to make his point by	4. What literary device does the author use to develop his ideas?

III. Keep the item stem and options as short and straightforward as possible. Do not include unnecessary information in the stem.

Poor Wording	Better Wording
1. It has been said that "need is the mother of invention." Which need led to the science that deals mainly with earth measurements?	1. Which need led to the development of geometry?

IV. Distractors should be plausible. If common errors are made, include options which incorporate those errors. Distractors which include familiar phrases are attractive to students who are not competent in the skill being tested. Correct answers that contain a synonym of a key word in the stem are not effective. The synonym serves as a clue to the answer.

V. In general, try to make options uniform in length and at the same level of specificity. A frequent problem with items is that the keyed option is more general or more specific than the distractors. While students may not know the answer to a question, they are able to choose the correct answer because it is different (more specific, more general, longer, shorter) from the other options.

VI. AVOID negatively worded item stems whenever possible. When negatives must be used, they should be capitalized or underlined. Also, when a negative must be used in the stem, the options should <u>not</u> be negatively stated.

VII. AVOID "all of the above" as a response option. When "all of the above" is the correct option, the student only has to know that two options are correct in order to make the right decision.

VIII. "None of the above" should be used only when the stem asks a question which has only one absolutely correct answer. Items which require the student to choose the best option should not have "none of the above" as an option.

SELECTION OF PASSAGES

Before you begin to search for passages, become familiar with the guidelines for each one of the six Content Categories for which you will be writing items. Knowing the item specifications will help you locate passages that lend themselves to the content categories that are to be tested on the BSE. **(Passage length 150-250 words)**

Select passages from the textbooks which are used in the entry level core curriculum courses at your institution. (Do not use textbook passages that have been reprinted in the materials used in Special Studies reading courses, as students enrolled in Special Studies may be familiar with this material.) Select from the fields of the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Try to select from a variety of subject matters in these fields.

Document each reading selection. The Regents' Testing Program must have this information in order to secure reprint permission for the passages. For each passage (or Fact-Opinion statement), and the items, send:

1. Photocopy of the title page of the text
2. Photocopy of the copyright page of the text
3. Photocopy of the page(s) containing the reading selection with page number(s)

ITEMS

For each passage, write at least one item for each Content Category. Whenever possible, write more than one item for each category. The items within each category may overlap; for example, two Main Idea items for a passage may be similar to each other. Similar items are not a problem because only one Main Idea item will be used on the final test form. However, if more items are available, the best item can be selected for the final form.

If the passages that you select are not appropriate for Fact-Opinion items, use the alternate format described in the item specification for this category.

The BSE Reading Content Categories are

Identification of Main Idea
Derivation of Meaning from Context
Differentiation of Fact and Opinion
Recognition of Implied Ideas
Identification of Organizational Patterns
Identification of Details

Each category is described in the Item Specifications in the following pages.

Item Specifications:

Reading

IDENTIFICATION OF MAIN IDEA

Definition of Content Category

This category requires the student to recognize 1) explicitly stated main ideas; and 2) implicitly stated main ideas. The category includes requiring the student to identify the author's purpose or the purpose of the passage.

Item Specifications

In selecting text/test passages, look for passages that contain 1) the explicitly stated main idea in a variety of positions (beginning, middle, end) in a single paragraph; 2) an implied main idea in a single paragraph; and 3) an implied main idea that is developed in two to three paragraphs. It would be appropriate for the measurement of explicitly stated main ideas to use textbook selections that reproduce section and paragraph headings which are guides to the main idea. The main idea in the passage should be adequately stated in one of the four options. Don't ask students to choose the "best" statement from four non-main idea options. Select passages with an adequately developed main idea. In the paragraph below the details (equinox, Egyptians, Polaris) do not help the reader determine just what it is about the earth's wobble that is really important.

Example (appropriate)

The moon's gravitational attraction on the earth's equatorial bulge causes the earth's axis to wobble very slowly. This motion is called the precession of the equinoxes and is quite similar to the wobbling motion of a top as it slows down. Precession is a term used to describe this type of wobble, and equinox is a term that designates a relationship between the earth's position and the "fixed" stars on certain days, occurring twice a year when day and night are of equal duration. This wobble requires 25,735 years to return to the same point, and accounts for the fact that the Egyptian astronomers noted a different star in the position of Polaris, which is our present north star.

The best statement of the main idea of the passage is that

A. in its movement through the heavens, the earth wobbles.

(appropriate example - continued)

B. the gravitational attraction of the moon is responsible for the earth's varying relation to the "fixed" stars.
C. modern scientific findings are based upon more sophisticated analytical methods than those employed by the ancient Egyptians.
D. Polaris is presently our north star.

Format of the Items

1) In writing the four response options, do not "give the answer away" by writing one general and three specific statements. Write at least two general statements, only one of which states the main idea of the particular passage.

2) Avoid testing recognition of the main idea by asking for the best title. Write options that are complete sentences.

Example (appropriate)

(Write an item stem that provides a clear statement of what the item is measuring.)

Pluto has the most unusual orbit of all the planets, one that, besides being the most eccentric, is also inclined 17° to the plane of the earth's orbit (ecliptic). Pluto orbits the sun at an average distance of 40 A. U., or 5.5 billion kilometers, but travels within less than 30 A. U. at perihelion and out to almost 50 A. U. at aphelion. The planet appeared at aphelion in 1865 and will again appear at this point in 2113. It will appear at perihelion in 1989. The orbit of Pluto is so eccentric as to bring it within the orbit of Neptune during the interval from 1979 to 1998. During this period, Neptune will be the farthest known planet from the sun. A collision between these two planets is impossible, for while their paths appear to intersect, the planes of orbit do not coincide. Pluto requires almost 248 earth years for one revolution; hence it has not moved very far against the background of stars since its discovery.

Pluto appears only as a tiny speck in even the largest telescopes, and therefore its diameter may only be estimated at about one-half the diameter of the earth; its probable mass is approximately one-seventh that of the earth. Recent observation of its rotation period, based on variations in brightness, produced what are considered to be quite reliable

(appropriate example - continued)

results: 6 days 9 hrs. 17 mins. The temperature of the planet is unknown due to its distance but has been approximated at 35° K (1238°C).

Both the eccentricity and inclination of Pluto's orbit suggest that it may represent an object that was not a member of the original solar system but was captured by the sun at a later time. Some have suggested that Pluto may be an errant moon of Neptune, or at least that it may have interacted gravitationally with Triton, Neptune's largest moon. In fact, the physical characteristics of both Triton and Pluto are similar.

Which of the following is the main idea of the passage?

A. Pluto's origins remain a mystery even today.
B. Pluto is one of the most unusual planets in our solar system.
C. Pluto's mass is about one-seventh the earth's size.
D. The orbit of Pluto is the most eccentric of all the planets.

(Options A and B are both general, but only one is the main idea. Option C is an attractive distractor because it is a detail contained in the passage. Option D is an attractive distractor because it is stated in the first sentence.)

DERIVATION OF MEANING FROM CONTEXT

Definition of Content Category

The category requires the student to determine the meaning of a word from contextual clues (such as synonyms, antonyms, examples, words in a series, restatement, explanations) in a passage. Students are required to determine the meaning of 1) technical, obscure, or otherwise unfamiliar vocabulary, and 2) familiar words with multiple meanings.

Item Specifications

Content

To measure the derivation of meaning from context, 1) select words (in a passage) that have at least two dictionary definitions and preferably four dictionary definitions. (If you select a word with only one dictionary definition or give only one definition in the four options, the question can be answered without context,) or 2) select technical, obscure or unfamiliar words with enough context provided to permit the derivation of meaning.

Examples (inappropriate)

Go out of doors any morning this December and look up at the eastern sky an hour or so before dawn. You will see there one of the most beautiful sights in all the heavens - - a blazing, blue-white beacon, many times brighter than Sirius, the most brilliant of the stars. Apart from the Moon itself, it will be the brightest object you will ever see in the night sky. . . .

It is the planet Venus, our sister world, reflecting across the gulfs of space, the sunlight glancing from her unbroken cloud shield. Every nineteen months she appears in the morning sky, rising shortly before the Sun, and all who see this brilliant herald of the Christmas dawn will inevitably . . .

The best definition of beacon as used in this passage is

A. a light.
B. a warning.
C. a star.
D. a planet.

(A student who knows the meaning of the word and that Venus is a planet would be mislead by the item. Beacon has only one dictionary definition.)

(Avoid options that fit the context of the passage but are not definitions of the word.)

(inappropriate examples - continued)

Maybe, because of familiarity, one pays little attention to these sense impressions - - but they exist, they are in their totality the experience that the individual has had, and if he were to become blind, deaf, or nerve-dead, the experience would undergo radical change.

As used in the passage, radical most nearly means

A. extreme.
B. quick.
C. fundamental.
D. fanatical.

(Options A and C would both be appropriate answers.)

(Avoid options that are too close in meaning, requiring too fine a discrimination from the context provided.)

Many of the cotton-state delegates again seceded, and the rest of the convention enthusiastically nominated their hero.

According to this passage, seceded means

A. withdrew.
B. nominated.
C. became habit-forming.
D. elected.

(Avoid words that can be answered on the basis of prior knowledge because there is only one possible meaning of the word.)

Examples (appropriate)

The nuclear family - - the married pair and their children - - is usually considered the example par excellence of a primary group.

As used in the paragraph, nuclear suggests

A. core.
B. marginal.
C. complex.
D. atomic.

(There is more than one possible definition, i.e., dictionary definition, thereby requiring attention to context.)

(appropriate examples - continued)

. . . Byzantine scholars, concerned chiefly with recovering and classifying Hellenic and Hellenistic learning, were <u>imitative</u> rather than creative, and their own contributions tended to be a rehash of classical works. . . .

As used in this passage, <u>imitative</u> means

A. classical. (contrast clue - "rather than")
B. non-creative.
C. counterfeit.
D. forceful.

It is the planet Venus, our sister world, reflecting across the gulfs of space, the sunlight <u>glancing</u> from her unbroken cloud shield. Every nineteen months she appears in the morning sky, rising shortly before the Sun, and all who see this brilliant herald of the Christmas dawn will inevitably be reminded of the star that led the Magi to Bethlehem.

The best meaning of <u>glancing</u> as used in this selection is

A. looking.
B. hitting.
C. reflecting.
D. winking.

DIFFERENTIATION OF FACT AND OPINION

Definition of Content Category

This category requires the student to distinguish between statements of fact and statements of opinion. A statement of fact may be objectively proved true or false. A statement of opinion may not be proved, as it expresses feelings and passes judgment. Items in this category are to measure the student's ability to differentiate between an author's use of factual statements and those that express the author's opinion. The items are not to test the truth or falsity of factual statements.

Item Specifications

Content

If you find passages that contain both fact and opinion statements, write items that are based on the intact passage. If you are unable to find passages suited to testing fact and opinion, locate statements and test the category with the following format. Select five statements (some facts, some opinions) from the same source.* You may have to reword the statements some. Give the nature of the source to establish context. For example: "The following statements were taken from a Political Science textbook chapter on the Constitutional Amendments." Have the student identify the fact or opinion nature of each one of the five statements.

*Please be sure to provide complete page number information for the statements if they are taken from different pages.

Format of the Items

Poor	Better
Which of the following is a fact?	Which of the following is a statement of fact, not an opinion?
Which of the following is an opinion?	Which of the following is an opinion, not a statement of fact?
Which statement is true according to the article?	

NOTE: The item stems identified as better tell the student what to look for in the response options.

Examples (inappropriate)

(Items that require the student to distinguish between facts that are mentioned by an author and facts that are not mentioned by the author are inappropriate for this category.)

Which statement is TRUE, according to the article?

A. The two parties envy each other, and each would like to see the other lose its position.
B. The two requirements for a revolt can be satisfied by the oppressors alone.
C. The oppressors seem to be having all the fun during the revolution.
D. The oppressed are satisfied with the status quo.

Which of the following is a statement of fact in the passage?

A. Competition breeds self-confidence.
B. Love is one source of self-validation.
C. External validation insures making right decisions.
D. People are faced by many decisions.

NOTE: All that is required of the student is a "visual match," i.e., if it is in the passage, it is the answer. This is a low-level skill, does not test comprehension, and does not test the differentiation of fact from opinion.

(Items that require the student to select the fact but contain true facts and false facts in the options are inappropriate.)

Which of the following states a fact?

A. Egyptian astronomers erred in their identification of the moon.
B. Certain "fixed" stars are visible only twice a year.
C. The earth's equatorial bulge wobbles very slowly.
D. The equatorial bulge is affected by the moon's gravity.

(inappropriate examples - continued)

(Items that contain figurative language are inappropriate.)

Of the following statements, which one is a statement of fact?

A. The Southerners were fire-eaters.
B. Douglas was a traitor.
C. Breckinridge was from a border state.
D. The Constitutional Union Party was a "Do Nothing" party.

Examples (appropriate)

John Quincy Adams was a chip off the old family glacier. Short (5 feet 7), thickset, and billiard-bald, he was even more frigidly austere than his presidential father, John Adams. Shunning people, he often went for solitary swims, sometimes stark naked, in the Potomac River. Essentially a closeted thinker, rather than a politician, he was irritable, sarcastic, and tactless. Yet few men have ever come to the Presidency with a more brilliant record in statecraft, especially in foreign affairs. He ranks as one of the most successful Secretaries of State, yet one of the least successful Presidents.

A man of puritanical honor, Adams entered upon his four year "sentence" in the White House smarting under charges of "bargain,""corruption," and "usurpation." Fewer than one-third of the voters had voted for him. As the first "minority President," he would have found it difficult to win popular support even under the most favorable conditions. Possessing almost none of the arts of the politician, he had achieved high office by commanding respect rather than by courting popularity. In an earlier era, an aloof Adams could win the votes of propertied men by sheer ability. But with the raw New Democracy in the driver's seat, a statesman without mass appeal could hardly hope for success at the polls.

Which of the following is an opinion about John Quincy Adams, not a fact?

A. He was tactless.
B. He was charged with corruption.
C. He sometimes went swimming naked in the Potamac.
D. His father was President John Adams.

(appropriate examples - continued)

(The following example is a more subtle means of testing the category.)

Which of the following could be a fact about John Quincy Adams, not an opinion?

A. He would have found it difficult to win popular support even under favorable conditions.
B. Fewer than one-third of the voters voted for him when he was elected President.
C. Adams could have won votes of the propertied class on his ability alone.
D. Adams's career as Secretary of State was successful due to his skill in foreign affairs.

The following five statements were taken from a textbook about the Constitution of the United States. Read all five statements. Indicate whether each statement could be a fact or is an opinion.

Statement 1 It was as though a group of carpenters had been called upon to add a back porch and then, without the permission of the owner, decided to tear down the house and build a new one.

Statement 2 The group of Founding Fathers first met in Philadelphia at the Constitutional Convention in May 1787.

Statement 3 In the first week the idea was brought up of discarding the old constitution and planning a new one.

Statement 4 This plan for a new constitution was a brazen breech of authority.

Statement 5 The campaign for ratification of the new Constitution lasted ten months.

Statement 1

A. Could be a fact rather than an opinion.
B. Is an opinion rather than a fact.

(appropriate examples - continued)

Statement 2

A. Could be a fact rather than an opinion.
B. Is an opinion rather than a fact.

Statement 3

A. Could be a fact rather than an opinion.
B. Is an opinion rather than a fact.

Statement 4

A. Could be a fact rather than an opinion.
B. Is an opinion rather than a fact.

Statement 5

A. Could be a fact rather than an opinion.
B. Is an opinion rather than a fact.

IDENTIFICATION OF IMPLIED IDEAS

Definition of Content Category

This category requires the student to

1) apply a general principle to a specific instance;

2) compare objects/ideas on some specified, clearly defined variable;

3) predict the occurrence of an event that could happen;

4) identify cause and effect relationships;

5) recognize ideas stated in language different from the author's.

Item Specifications

Content

Select passages which will enable you to write items which test the students' ability to make inferences (from what an author has said) about what an author has not stated. The content appropriate to measuring recognition of implied ideas depends somewhat on which of the item subcategories the item is intended to measure. Please specifiy the subcategory.

Examples (inappropriate)

(Avoid item stems that ask for ideas that are stated in the passages. Be sure the ideas are implied.)

This passage states that

A. John Quincy Adams was an unsuccessful President but a successful Secretary of State.
B. John Adams was more austere than his son.
C. Most Americans voted for John Quincy Adams to become president.
D. John Quincy Adams was a statesman whose ability won mass appeal.

(inappropriate examples - continued)

(Avoid items that can be answered from explicit details requiring no inference on the part of the reader.)

. . . Work on plant hormones is one of the most active areas of modern botanical research, and our knowledge of this subject is growing rapidly. . . .

Which of the following statements is true according to the passage?

A. Modern botanical research has increased rapidly.
B. Study of plant hormones is more vigorous than other areas of botanical research.
C. Studies in botanical research appear to be subsiding.
D. Botanical research is a fascinating and complex area of study.

(Avoid items that require the reader to make an inference based on inadequate information. The options should be able to be identified as correct or incorrect based on the passage.)

The relationship of machines to the Industrial Revolution was similar to the relationship between

A. engines and automobiles.
B. Republicans and Democrats.
C. revolutions and rifles.
D. salt and peanuts.

(This example requires the student to draw an analogy based on concepts neither stated nor implied. The analogy format also introduces a skill that is not appropriate to the BSE.)

Examples (appropriate)

(subcategory - application of general principle to a specific instance)

Most individuals in our society, beset by parent-bred, competition-bred insecurity, need acceptance, confirmation, justification. Part of this need is inescapable. Life requires continual decision-making: white vs. red, honesty vs. dishonesty, etc. In the presence of uncertainty, most of us need to know that we are making the right decisions, so we seek external validation. We are, therefore, absurdly

(appropriate examples - continued)

pleased when we meet someone who shares our penchant for Palestrina or peanut butter. Should we find one person whose choices in many different matters coincide with our own, we will value this buttress of our self-esteem. This attachment to a source of self-validation constitutes one important basis for love.

It is implied in the passage that individuals would be most likely to join an organization that

A. presented new ideas to the members.
B. promoted competition among the members.
C. supported the beliefs of the members.
D. served good food to the members.

(Note that the stem makes it clear to the student that the answer is not directly stated in the passage. The general principle is given in the first sentence of the selection. An inference is required to answer the item because organizations are not discussed in the passage.)

(subcategory - to predict the occurrence of an event that has not happened but which is possible, given the information in the passage.)

John Quincy Adams was a chip off the old family glacier. Short (5 feet 7), thickset, and billiard-bald, he was even more frigidly austere than his presidential father, John Adams. Shunning people, he often went for solitary swims, sometimes stark naked, in the Potomac River. Essentially a closeted thinker, rather than a politician, he was irritable, sarcastic, and tactless. Yet few men have ever come to the Presidency with a more brilliant record in statecraft, especially in foreign affairs. He ranks as one of the most successful Secretaries of State, yet one of the least successful Presidents.

A man of puritanical honor, Adams entered upon his four-year "sentence" in the White House smarting under charges of "bargain,""corruption," and "usurpation." Fewer than one-third of the voters had voted for him. As the first "minority President," he would have found it difficult to win popular support even under the most favorable conditions. Possessing almost none of the arts

(appropriate examples - continued)

of the politician, he had achieved high office by commanding respect rather than by courting popularity. In an earlier era, an aloof Adams could win the votes of propertied men by sheer ability. But with the raw New Democracy in the driver's seat, a statesman without mass appeal could hardly hope for success at the polls.

Which individual would be most likely to be elected President in the era described in the passage?

An individual who is

A. skilled in statecraft
B. respected by his community
C. educated and wealthy
D. widely known and liked

IDENTIFICATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS

Definition of Content Category

This category requires the student to identify the logical structure inherent in a passage by indicating the methods and/or devices an author uses to clarify ideas and convey meaning. The student should be able to distinguish between the overall pattern/purpose of a passage (such as argument) and the method the author employs to achieve the purpose (such as examples, theory, etc.)

Item Specifications

Content

As you write your response options, state the pattern in language that the student will understand. Whenever possible, avoid using label terminology (such as chronological order) when it is possible to use more commonly known vocabulary (such as time order or a sequence of events.)

The following types of organizational patterns (logical patterns and discourse forms) are appropriate for testing: Definition of a term, Problem-Solution, Repetition, Analysis, Sequence of events or Chronology, Comparison or Comparison-Contrast, Argument (option-reasons, statement-support, conclusion-proof), Narration, and Description.

Format of the Items

1) Item stems that require the student to guess the main idea before he can identify the organizational pattern are inappropriate. For example, the item stem "The author makes his point by" requires the student to first determine what point. To avoid testing another content category simultaneously, briefly state the point in the stem. This may mean we could not ask both a main idea and a pattern question for the same passage if the "point" you state in the item stem is always the main idea. Try to write at least some pattern questions that are not dependent on the main idea.

Example (inappropriate)

John Quincy Adams was a chip off the old family glacier. Short (5 feet 7), thickset, and billiard-bald, he was even more frigidly austere than his presidential father, John

(inappropriate example - continued)

Adams. Shunning people, he often went for solitary swims, sometimes stark naked, in the Potomac River. Essentially a closet thinker, rather than a politician, he was irritable, sarcastic, and tactless. Yet few men have ever come to the Presidency with a more brilliant record in statecraft, especially in foreign affairs. He ranks as one of the most successful Secretaries of State, yet one of the least successful Presidents.

A man of puritanical honor, Adams entered upon his four-year "sentence" in the White House smarting under charges of "bargain,""corruption," and "usurpation." Fewer than one-third of the voters had voted for him. As the first "minority President," he would have found it difficult to win popular support even under the most favorable conditions. Possessing almost none of the arts of the politician, he had achieved high office by commanding respect rather than by courting popularity. In an earlier era, an aloof Adams could win the votes of propertied men by sheer ability. But with the raw New Democracy in the driver's seat, a stateman without mass appeal could hardly hope for success at the polls.

The author makes his point through

A. analysis of personality.
B. description of behavior.
C. description of circumstances surrounding Adams' election.
D. all of the above.

(The student must first guess "what point." An additional problem with this item is that it is essentially a DETAIL item. All the reader has to do is to go back to the passage to see what the author did and did not include.)

2) Avoid items that require the student to differentiate fact from opinion, as this skill is tested in another category.

Example (inappropriate)

The author seems to make his point through

A. critical evaluation.
B. contrasting facts.
C. personal opinion.
D. historical examples.

(Options B and C require the student to be skilled in a separate test category [Differentiation of Fact and Opinion] in order to answer a question in the Pattern category.)

3) Response options that are too similar in meaning (and therefore are confusing) should be avoided.

Example (inappropriate)

Education all over the world suffered previously from barbarous practices and outworn philosophies. Nearly everywhere the time-honored objective was to make faithful believers out of the children, or if not that, at least dutiful citizens. Little attention was given to the varying psychologies of children, or to the reasons why some children fail. The welfare of the children themselves received scant consideration. Uppermost were the interests and requirements of church and state. Yet a few bold spirits challenged this system. The most eminent among them was the French-Swiss philosopher and author of the Social Contract, Jean Jacques Rousseau. The educational ideas of this unusual man were contained in his novel Emile. They revolved around the doctrine that man is fundamentally good. This does not mean that human beings are angels. Neither are they devils. It is simply that there is no such thing as original sin. Yet men in society are bad and unhappy. What makes them so? The answer, according to Rousseau, is the whole social environment, the state, the church, and the schools. Banish the corrupting influence of these, and every individual will have an equal chance to develop in peace and happiness.

The writer develops his main idea through the use of

A. stories.
B. examples.
C. details.
D. reasoning.

(Options B and C are too similar. The passage contains evidence to support options B, C, and D as correct!)

4) Items that ask how an author structures/develops his ideas are appropriate.

Examples (appropriate)

The moon's gravitational attraction on the earth's equatorial bulge causes the earth's axis to wobble very slowly. This motion is called the precession of the equinoxes and is quite similar to the wobbling motion of a top as it slows down. Precession is a term used to describe this type of wobble, and equinox is a term that designates a relationship between the earth's position and the "fixed" stars on certain days, occurring twice a year when day and night are of equal duration. This wobble requires 25,735 years to return to the same point, and accounts for the fact that the Egyptian astrono-

(appropriate examples - continued)

mers noted a different star in the position of Polaris, which is our present north star.

What is the primary concern in the passage?

A. to compare and contrast
B. to give the sequence of several events
C. to provide a definition
D. to make an argument

5) Items that require the application/comprehension of an organizational pattern are appropriate.

Beyond question the presidential election of 1860 was the most fateful in American history. On it hung the issue of peace or war.

Deeply divided, the Democrats met in Charleston, South Carolina, with Douglas the leading candidate of the Northern wing of the party. But the Southern "fire-eaters" regarded him as a traitor as a result of his stand on the Lecompton Constitution and the Freeport Doctrine. After a bitter wrangle over the platform, the delegates from most of the cotton states walked out. When the remainder could not scrape together the necessary two-thirds vote for Douglas, the entire body dissolved in confusion. The first tragic secession was the secession of Southerners from the Democratic national convention. It became habit-forming.

The Democrats met again in Baltimore. This time, the Douglas Democrats, chiefly from the North, were firmly in the saddle. Many of the cotton-state delegates again seceded, and the rest of the convention enthusiastically nominated their hero. The platform came out squarely for popular sovereignty and, as a sop to the South, against obstruction of the Fugitive Slave law by the states.

Seceding Southern Democrats promptly organized a rival convention in Baltimore, in which many of the Northern states were unrepresented. They selected as their leader the stern-jawed Vice President, John C. Breckinridge, a man of moderate views from the border state of Kentucky. The platform favored the extension of slavery into the territories and the annexation of Cuba.

A middle-of-the-road group, fearing for the Union, hastily organized the Constitutional Union Party, sneered at as the "Do Nothing" or "Old Gentleman's Party." It consisted mainly of former Whigs and Know-Nothings. Desperately anxious to elect a compromise candidate, they met in Baltimore and nominated for the Presidency John Bell of Tennessee. They went

(appropriate examples - continued)

into battle ringing hand bells for Bell, and voicing the slogan, "The Union, the Constitution, and the Enforcement of the Laws."

Which of the following events happened last?

A. The Presidential election of 1860.
B. The Constitutional Union Party was formed.
C. The Democrats met in Charleston.
D. The Democrats met in Baltimore.

(NOTE: This item is appropriate because the passage begins with the event that happened last and then goes on to the events leading up to the last event. It is important for the student to realize that the author presents the events "out of order" and to be able to understand the "real order.")

6) Item stems which indicate the point (for example, "the author supports his argument by" or "the author gives us insight into the character of") are appropriate.

The notion of three separate-but-equal branches of government has been eroded by the pressures of the twentieth century. In the past, American Presidents have, at varying times, exercised great powers, as did Lincoln during the Civil War. But in modern times, power, especially military-diplomatic power, has been steadily concentrated in the hands of the President. The power of Congress to declare war, for example, has greatly diminished in importance since the Second World War. In 1970 President Nixon committed American forces to Cambodia without the approval of Congress. In a nuclear attack the President would obviously have no time to consult Congress. But even in the case of Vietnam, a bitter and protracted struggle, Congress never declared war.

Which of the following is the primary means the author uses to suggest that the three branches of government have unequal power?

A. causes of the concentration of power in the three branches
B. exceptions to the concentration of power in the three branches
C. examples of the increase of Presidential military power
D. examples of the increase of Congressional military power

(The item is appropriate because although the information is provided in the passage, the student must evaluate the relevance of each option to the author's overall argument. *Note that the stem explains the nature of the argument. The author illustrates the inequality of power in the discussion of President Nixon and "the President in a nuclear attack".)

IDENTIFICATION OF DETAILS

Definition of Content Category

The category requires the student to

1) identify details that are important to the meaning of the passage.

2) interpret and synthesize the details in the passage.

Item Specifications

Content

Write items testing details that are important to comprehension of the passage. This commentary may seem obvious, but trivia-detail items abound. Such items are extremely time-consuming to answer - - and yet are unessential to comprehension.

Examples (inappropriate)

Beyond question the presidential election of 1860 was the most fateful in American history. On it hung the issue of peace or war.

Deeply divided, the Democrats met in Charleston, South Carolina, with Douglas the leading candidate of the Northern wing of the party. But the Southern "fire-eaters" regarded him as a traitor as a result of his stand on the Lecompton Constitution and the Freeport Doctrine. After a bitter wrangle over the platform, the delegates from most of the cotton states walked out. When the remainder could not scrape together the necessary two-thirds vote for Douglas, the entire body dissolved in confusion. The first tragic secession was the secession of Southerners from the Democratic national convention. It became habit-forming.

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(inappropriate examples - continued)

A middle-of-the-road group, fearing for the Union, hastily organized the Constitutional Union Party, sneered at as the "Do Nothing" or "Old Gentleman's Party." It consisted mainly of former Whigs and Know-Nothings. Desperately anxious to elect a compromise candidate, they met in Baltimore and nominated for the Presidency John Bell of Tennessee. They went into battle ringing hand bells for Bell, and voicing the slogan, "The Union, the Constitution, and the Enforcement of the Laws."

Which of the following did not happen in Baltimore?

A. Douglas got the nomination.
B. Breckinridge was nominated.
C. Southern states walked out.
D. The Northern and Southern Democrats reached a compromise.

(This is a trivial question.)

Go out of doors any morning this December and look up at the eastern sky an hour or so before dawn. You will see there one of the most beautiful sights in all the heavens - - a blazing, blue-white beacon, many times brighter than Sirius, the most brilliant of the stars. Apart from the Moon itself, it will be the brightest object you will ever see in the night sky. It will still be visible even when the Sun rises; you will even be able to find it at midday if you know exactly where to look.

It is the planet Venus, our sister world, reflecting across the gulfs of space the sunlight glancing from her unbroken cloud shield. Every nineteen months she appears in the morning sky, rising shortly before the Sun, and all who see this brilliant herald of the Christmas dawn will inevitably be reminded of the star that led the Magi to Bethlehem.

Venus appears in the morning sky

A. every 19 months.
B. brighter than the moon.
C. every December.
D. shortly after dawn.

(The stem doesn't present the question. The question tests a detail that is unimportant to the comprehension of the passage.)

Format of Items

1) Provide enough information in the item stem so that the student knows what the question is. The student should not have to read the four options to understand the question.

Example (inappropriate)

According to this passage, John Quincy Adams

A. had popular support.
B. was a tactful politician.
C. was John Adams' grandson.
D. was accused of corruption.

2) Avoid items that require the student to identify a detail that the author does not mention. It is very time-consuming to locate three details that are mentioned. Further, a detail that is not mentioned is quite likely unrelated to comprehension or the author would have mentioned it.

Examples (inappropriate)

Human beings are always interested in other human beings. Perhaps the majority of people are interested in people more than in anything else. Often, in conversation, one hears: "What did she look like?" "What was she wearing?" "What does he look like?" To answer such questions, we describe.

In describing, one notes the details that he has observed, or more precisely, details that he has been made aware of by the use of all his senses - - sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch. All of the environment - - the world - - comes to one first through the senses; and if an individual is to communicate to others what his experiences in the environment are like, he must report through words what his senses have told him. Even so common an experience as washing one's face in the morning provides numerous sense impressions - - the flashing on of the light in the bathroom; the gleam of chromium and porcelain; grey steam rising and clouding the mirror; the scalding feel of overhot water; the response of the nerves to contrasting cold or lukewarm water; the smells of soap, shaving cream, and toothpaste; and the feel of the soft tubes or of the bar of soap; cold hardness if new, wet slippery smoothness if used. Nor is the ear dull to varied sounds: the splash, hiss, trickle, or gurgle of

(inappropriate examples - continued)

water, the rubbing of palms, popping and roaring in the ears. Maybe, because of familiarity, one pays little attention to these sense impressions - - but they exist, they are in their totality the experience that the individual has had, and if he were to become blind, deaf, or nerve-dead, the experience would undergo radical change.

The sense excluded from the description of washing one's face is

A. sight.
B. smell.
C. hearing.
D. taste.

Because the Industrial Revolution took place, all of the following are correct EXCEPT

A. the industrial revolution changed the politics of the western world.
B. coal miners probably began using more machines.
C. farmers rejected the industrial revolution.
D. the movement is still going on today.

(Note: when combined with the stem, "C" sounds very awkward and is ungrammatical.)

Examples (appropriate)

(subcategory - interpreting and synthesizing the details contained in a passage)

It is easy to fault the youth movement of our time. Its most obvious deficiency is indifference to creative achievement. Only in music and to a limited extent in art do its leaders show much interest in equaling or surpassing the accomplishments of the past. Science leaves them cold or even antagonistic because of its association with war-making activities. Literature has little appeal except for caustic novels and dramas and satiric poetry. Social sciences, by contrast, evoke a more positive response. Sociology, anthropology, and environmental studies seem more relevant to a threatened world than ancient history, languages, and advanced mathematics. Yet against

(appropriate examples - continued)

these generally negative attitudes must be ranked some outstanding achievements. One of these is a more constructive view of race relations. Young people, with few exceptions, regard notions of racial superiority and inferiority as a mass of baseless prejudice. Many have suited their actions to their principles by campaigning for desegregation and civil rights, by free racial association, and sometimes by intermarriage. Finally, it is not too much to credit the youth rebellion with frustrating the designs of certain great powers in many parts of the Third World. It was this rebellion that exposed the inhumanity and hypocrisy of the American adventure in Southeast Asia. Long before adult liberals lifted a finger against the bombing raids and body counts of that war, students in colleges and universities stormed the institutions of the Establishment in angry protest.

Evidence from the selection supports the idea that

A. members of the younger generation act upon their beliefs.
B. leaders of the younger generation lack the ability to surpass the achievements of their elders.
C. few of the leaders of the younger generation endorse radical action.
D. the younger generation is relatively unconcerned with the social issue of racism.

The official adoption of the Greek language in the formative centuries of the Byzantine empire proved a stimulus to the preservation of classical works in philosophy, literature, and science. The scholars who perpetuated the Greek tradition were not clerics, as in the West, but members of the civil service; Byzantine monasteries produced many saints and mystics but showed little interest in learning or teaching. Byzantine scholars, concerned chiefly with recovering and classifying Hellenic and Hellenistic learning, were imitative rather than creative, and their own contributions tended to be a rehash of classical works. Yet when in the twelfth century the West began absorbing Greek science and Aristotelian philosophy from the Muslims in Spain, it was to Byzantine scholarship that the latter were indebted. Moreover, most of the West's knowledge of Greek literature and Platonic philosophy

(appropriate example - continued)

came from Constantinople in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The writer seems to believe that Byzantine scholarship was

A. merely a rehash of older works and therefore unimportant.
B. creative and of utmost importance to later knowledge of Greek tradition.
C. imitative and uncreative, a vital link in preserving Greek tradition.
D. an effective means of producing many saints and mystics in Byzantine times.

Examples (appropriate)

(subcategory - identify details that are important to the meaning of the passage)

Education all over the world suffered previously from barbarous practices and outworn philosophies. Nearly everywhere the time-honored objective was to make faithful believers out of the children. Little attention was given to the varying psychologies of children, or to the reasons why some children fail. The welfare of the children themselves received scant consideration. Uppermost were the interests and requirements of church and state. Yet a few bold spirits challenged this system. The most eminent among them was the French-Swiss philosopher and author of the Social Contract, Jean Jacques Rousseau. The educational ideas of this unusual man were contained in his novel Emile. They revolved around the doctrine that man is fundamentally good. This does not mean that human beings are angels. Neither are they devils. It is simply that there is no such thing as original sin. Yet people in society are bad and unhappy. What makes them so? The answer, according to Rousseau, is the whole social environment, the state, the church, and the schools. Banish the corrupting influence of these, and every individual will have an equal chance to develop in peace and happiness.

Basic to Rousseau's philosophy is the idea that man is

A. neither good nor evil.
B. both good and evil.
C. fundamentally evil.
D. fundamentally good.

(Appropriate examples - continued)

The official adoption of the Greek language in the formative centuries of the Byzantine empire proved a stimulus to the preservation of classical works in philosophy, literature, and science. The scholars who perpetuated the Greek tradition were not clerics, as in the West, but members of the civil service; Byzantine monasteries produced many saints and mystics but showed little interest in learning or teaching. Byzantine scholars, concerned chiefly with recovering and classifying Hellenic and Hellenistic learning, were imitative rather than creative, and their own contributions tended to be a rehash of classical works. Yet when in the twelfth century the West began absorbing Greek science and Aristotelian philosophy from the Muslims in Spain, it was to Byzantine scholarship that the latter were indebted. Moreover, most of the West's knowledge of Greek literature and Platonic philosophy came from Constantinople in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The people responsible for preserving Greek literature and philosophy were

A. Muslims.
B. clerics.
C. civil servants.
D. saints and mystics.

(subcategory - to interpret and synthesize the details in the passage)

Pluto has the most unusual orbit of all the planets, one that, besides being the most eccentric, is also inclined 17° to the plane of the earth's orbit (ecliptic). Pluto orbits the sun at an average distance of 40 A. U., or 5.5 billion kilometers, but travels within less than 30 A. U. at perihelion and out to almost 50 A. U. at aphelion. The planet appeared at aphelion in 1865 and will again appear at this point in 2113. It will appear at perihelion in 1989. The orbit of Pluto is so eccentric as to bring it within the orbit of Nepture during the interval from 1979 to 1998. During this period, Neptune will be the farthest known planet from the sun. A collision between these two planets is impossible, for while their paths appear to intersect, the planes of orbit do not coincide. Pluto requires almost 248 earth years for one revolution; hence it has not moved very far against the background of stars since its discovery.

(appropriate example - continued)

Pluto appears only as a tiny speck in even the largest telescopes, and therefore its diameter may only be estimated at about one-half the diameter of the earth; its probable period, based on variations in brightness, produced what are considered to be quite reliable results: 6 days 9 hrs. 17 mins. The temperature of the planet is unknown due to its distance but has been approximated at 35°K (-238°C).

Both the eccentricity and inclination of Pluto's orbit suggest that it may represent an object that was not a member of the original solar system but was captured by the sun at a later time. Some have suggested that Pluto may be an errant moon of Neptune, or at least that it may have interacted gravitationally with Triton, Neptune's largest moon. In fact, the physical characteristics of both Triton and Pluto are similar.

Which planet is usually the farthest known planet from the sun?

A. Neptune
B. Pluto
C. Earth
D. Triton